

THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE REQUIREMENT FOR THE PH.D.

CHARLES BIRD, WILLIAM T. HERON, PAUL E. MEEHL, DONALD G. PATERSON

University of Minnesota

THE Graduate School at the University of Minnesota appointed a committee in 1945 to reconsider the present requirement that a candidate for the Ph.D. degree must pass special examinations in two foreign languages, usually German and French. Chairman R. M. Elliott appointed the authors of this article to act as a committee to prepare reports for the graduate faculty in psychology to be presented to the Graduate School Committee on the Foreign Language Requirement.

The present article presents two reports which have been submitted to the Graduate Committee. It has been submitted to the AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGIST in order to focus the attention of academic and professional psychologists upon foreign language requirements.

Members of the graduate faculty in Child Welfare and in Educational Psychology and Education have also prepared reports which are in harmony with the reports presented below.

REPORT OF DEPARTMENT COMMITTEE

The response to a brief questionnaire concerning the importance of the foreign language requirement for the Ph.D. degree in psychology circulated to members of the graduate faculty in psychology November 15-18, 1946 is summarized as follows:

1. Seven of nine graduate faculty members consider knowledge of foreign language to be of "little or no value" for scholarly work in psychology. None believed it to be of "great value."

2. Of 79 Ph.D. theses approved by the department since 1920, the present graduate faculty can recall only two in which explicit use of German or French was incorporated in the dissertation.

3. Pooled rankings assigned to knowledge areas outside of the field of psychology in answer to the following question, "From your present vantage points, how would you rank the knowledge of the following non-psychological subjects as to their professional value to a psychologist in your own field?" were as follows:

Statistics	1
Biological Sciences	2.5
Mathematics	2.5
Social Sciences	4
Philosophy	5
Education	6.5
Public Speaking	6.5
Foreign Language	8

The following resolution was adopted by the graduate faculty members of the department of psychology:

"Whereas the traditional requirement of mastery of two foreign languages for the Ph.D. degree with psychology as a major can be called into question for the following reasons:

1. In most of the fields and areas of knowledge in psychology at present there is no significant information published in foreign languages.¹
2. Most students under the present system do not learn a useful mastery of the foreign languages.
3. The traditional requirement of French and German is archaic in view of present world conditions inasmuch as those two nations are not now producing scholarly contributions and the greater part of their major contributions have been and will be translated into English.
4. In the few instances where a graduate student needs to consult a foreign language publication, it would be more economical of the student's time and energy to have the material translated for him than to have to spend the effort to learn languages for which he will have very minor use.
5. In most cases there are other skills upon which time for mastery could be better

¹The accuracy of this statement is attested to by the evidence presented by S. W. Fernberger, "On number of articles of psychological interest published in different languages," *Amer. J. Psychol.* in 1917, 1926, 1936, and 1946.

spent both from the standpoint of the individual and with reference to social welfare than it is now spent in the attempted mastery of foreign languages.

Now, therefore, be it resolved that it is the consensus of the graduate faculty members of the department of psychology that the Graduate School of the University of Minnesota should revoke the requirement of mastery of two foreign languages for the Ph.D. degree in psychology and that our department should be given the right to prescribe in place of this traditional requirement substitutions which are acceptable to the Executive Committee of the Graduate School and the Graduate Faculty and which the department genuinely believes will more adequately fit the Ph.D. candidate for his proper place in society."

A series of options might be adopted so that the requirements for the Ph.D. degree in psychology could be made sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of each candidate with the approval of the major adviser, the graduate committee of the department, and the Graduate Group Committee. The Ph.D. in psychology requirement would then be major, minor, dissertation, and two options from among the following:

1. Reading knowledge of German
2. Reading knowledge of French
3. Reading knowledge of Russian
4. Reading knowledge of Spanish
5. Statistics
6. Mathematics through calculus
7. A biological science, including medical subjects
8. A social science
9. Philosophy and logic of science
10. Courses in problems of higher education
11. Advanced courses in public speaking

None of the options from 5 through 8 could be chosen if it constitutes the student's minor.

Should the graduate faculty permit modifications of the foreign language requirement, the department would proceed to work out a more definite and specific definition of how options listed above could be satisfied.

COMMENT ON ABOVE REPORT

It is to be noted that the Department Committee merely requested autonomy in the setting of its Ph.D. requirements. Undoubtedly, for some students one

or two foreign languages would be required. For others, especially those preparing for positions in applied psychology, probably no foreign language would be required.

The request for autonomy has not been acted upon and will not be acted upon until the Graduate School Committee completes and submits its report to the graduate faculty of the university. Whatever action is finally taken will, in all probability, not occur until sometime during the academic year 1947-48.

To supplement the report reflecting the views of the graduate faculty of the department and to guide the department in the setting of options it was decided to canvass the opinions of those who hold the Ph.D. degree in psychology from Minnesota. A total of 77 questionnaires were mailed; 68 were returned with 9 failing to respond, a percentage return of 89. The summary of the results are presented below without comment.

Opinions of Ph.D.'s in Psychology

- I. Have you read professional psychological material in any foreign language since 1936?

	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
Frequently	3	4
Several times	14	20
One or two occasions	27	40
Not at all	24	35
Total	68	99

- II. How well can you at the present read psychological material in the following languages?

	<i>German</i>		<i>French</i>	
	<i>Num- ber</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>	<i>Num- ber</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
Easily	5	7	15	22
With difficulty	11	16	20	29
With great difficulty	14	20	14	20
Not well enough to be of practical value	38	56	19	28
Total	68	99	68	99

- III. You fulfilled the foreign language requirement. Of how much value do you consider that fact to be in your own post-Ph.D. work?

	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
Great value	0	0
Considerable value	7	10
Little value	33	49
No value	28	41
Total	68	100

- IV. From your present vantage point, how would you rank knowledge of the following non-psychological subjects as to their professional value to you if you would have had an opportunity to choose?

(Rank in order of merit)

	Rank Order	Mean Rank Order	S. D.
Statistics.....	1	1.68	1.07
Biological science (includ. med.).....	2	2.81	1.62
Social science.....	3	4.19	1.47
Philosophy and logic of science.....	4	4.26	1.76
Mathematics (excl. statistics)	5	4.62	2.04
Public speaking.....	6	5.46	1.77
Education (prob. of higher educ., history of educ., or philosophy of educ.).....	7	6.02	1.86
Foreign language.....	8	6.88	1.45

V. What do you believe should be done about the foreign language requirement for Ph.D.'s in psychology at Minnesota?

	Number	Per Cent
Continued as at present.....	4	6
Only one foreign language to be required	10	15
Abolished.....	11	16
Student to be permitted options.....	39	57
Not qualified to say.....	1	1
No answer.....	3	4
Total.....	68	99

COMMENTS OF RESPONDENTS

That the respondents felt keenly about the subject matter of the questionnaire is evident from the fact that an 89 per cent return was secured without using Toops² four and five letter follow-up technique to insure a similar return. Additional evidence is available in the comments inserted on a goodly number of the questionnaires. The following quotations have been selected to indicate the variety of views expressed.

The following represent the small number in favor of the foreign language requirement: "I suspect that the language requirement may serve as a 'screening' function." "A knowledge of foreign languages is worthwhile as a part of the cultural requirement for a Ph.D. . . . I think that persons without knowledge of foreign languages are not well educated." "I suppose it is really very difficult to justify the inclusion of language requirements for all prospective Ph.D.'s in psychology. Nevertheless, I am definitely in favor of retaining this 'hurdle' as one of the requirements." "I believe the Ph.D. degree should reflect cultural as well as professional training; therefore, a graduate student should master one foreign language."

The following reflect varying degrees of opposition

²Toops, H. A. The returns from follow-up letters to questionnaires. *J. appl. Psychol.*, 1926, 10, 92-101.

to the present requirements: "Tailor-make the requirements to meet the individual's needs, emphasize language if necessary for the person." "I favor retention of one language requiring more than superficial knowledge of the language." "I had four years of German in high school and three full-year college courses. The system whereby students learn only enough to pass an exam is probably wholly useless." "I think the language requirement should be abolished not because its objective is bad but because it does not achieve its objective." "The Graduate School ought not to lay down inflexible and universally applicable prerequisites." "Most of us have more than we can do to keep up with the literature in English in our interest areas." "The time spent on learning foreign languages might better have been spent for further orientation in more pertinent fields." "I should prefer to have spent those 100± hours (in learning the language) otherwise and hire translators now if ever necessary. That a psychologist should be made to learn French and not be required to understand a derivative or the logic of science, for two examples, is utterly absurd." "In my present work, I make little use of biological sciences, mathematics or language. I wish I knew a whole lot more about education, philosophy, social studies and was less rusty on statistics." "I would have benefited by spending the time devoted to foreign languages on study of educational administration, labor relations and personnel administration, and philosophy and logic of science." "If an article is good it is translated by a linguist with more accuracy than I can do it. I can pay a language major for translation and save time." "I feel that the language requirement was a meaningless hurdle greatly contributing to 'graduate student neurosis.'"

A concluding bit of information is in order. The Graduate Committee on the Foreign Language Requirement is proceeding in a most admirable fashion. It is being aided by the Committee on Institutional Research under the chairmanship of Dean T. R. McConnell. This Committee has directed Dr. Ruth E. Eckert to ascertain the views of all members of the graduate faculty, graduate students now on campus who have passed their foreign language requirement and all Ph.D.'s who have received their degrees from the University of Minnesota. These three inquiries will indicate the extent to which psychology, educational psychology, education, and child welfare represent a unique problem with respect to the question of foreign languages for the Ph.D.